

# My Life Story *by Emma Steele Brown*

I was born in Selma, Alabama in the late 40s. My parents are Ruth Bettie Steele and Columbus Steele, Jr. I'm the oldest of eight children. I lived in Alabama all of my childhood. As a kid growing up in the Deep South, I thought life was great. But I look back over my life now, and I know that we lived in hell right here on earth.

Being the oldest of eight siblings, I took on the role of being a mother at a very early age: cooking, washing clothes, and cleaning the house. Both my parents worked in the cotton fields. A bench was made for me to stand on so I could reach the top of the stove to start a fire and cook the food before my parents got home from the cotton fields.

They did not make much money, but we always had food; if it was only beans and corn bread, we ate.

My parents worked the farmland. We grew everything we ate. The men on the farm fished on the Alabama River and we had fish. We had no electricity or gas, so we used kerosene lamps for light and wood for heat. Because we had no car, when my parents had to go into the town, they would use the horse and buggy to take them to the bridge that crosses over the Alabama River. There they would have to park it and walk across the bridge to get to town and buy whatever they needed and walk back to the horse and buggy.

My parents left the farm and moved to what we called the city when I was about six years old. We moved into a house that had electricity, but we still had to heat with wood or coal and cook with wood only. We never owned a clock because we lived in a house where you didn't need one to wake you. When the sun came up, it would shine on the house and the light would come right through the cracks. This was our alarm clock. One time, we got a lot of magazines and made some paste out of flour and wallpapered the inside of the house. We thought we were on top of the world, for it kept out the sunlight early in the morning. I remember four or five of my siblings sleeping in the same bed together. My mother used to take clothes "that we worn," put them on top of the bed, cover them with a sheet, and tuck it



under the mattress to keep us warm on cold nights. And we didn't have the mattress that you buy out of the store; ours was homemade.

Going to school was hard because we did not have what the other kids had. We would always sit alone when we ate lunch because we didn't want other kids to see what we had. We had the brown bag lunch, which would have grease all over it from the biscuit inside. We never had new books, always the old ones from the white school. In High School I remember feeling so ashamed of having to wear the same clothes two or three times a week, which you had to wash out by hand at night and dry by the fire. I would not go out for recess because I was afraid that the piece of cardboard paper that I had in the bottom of my shoe to cover the hole would fall out.

I can remember going to town and wanting something to eat. I had to go to a window labeled "colored" and wait to be served. There were benches, but I could not sit on them. They were for whites only, so I sat on the ground. If I needed to use the bathroom or wanted a drink of water, most of the time I was out of luck. When I think about this, it makes me sick: we had to say "yes sir" and "yes ma'am" to white kids our own age and we could not look them in the eyes. If they hit us, we could not hit them back. They could come to our house, go inside and eat our food, but we could not go inside their houses or eat their food unless they had leftovers and didn't want them. When we shopped for clothes, we could not try things on because we were considered nasty, diseased people. If we bought it and it was too small or large, or if it had any type of defect, we owned it.

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My God, what a turn around my life took in the early 60s when The Civil Rights Movement came to Selma. Everyone was talking about what was going on, how kids were skipping school to go down to Brown Chapel Church (BCC), and they were marching and boycotting the stores. One day, my mother watched us walk to the bus stop and get on the bus. She warned us not to skip school. But when the bus got to Water Street, it stopped and every one on the bus got off. We walked down to the BCC where they were having a meeting. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was there. I made my way down to the front of the church and sat on the floor where I could see and hear everything. The message that day changed my life. I'm just as good as or better than anyone is, and I have rights too. It gave me back my courage that I already had but had never used.

I was engaged at the age of 15, married at 16, dropped out of high school and then went to night adult school. I had my first child before I turned 17. Living in the South at that time I thought that I had it all together because I had finished night school, which was big thing for

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## Women Making a Difference

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me. I could read and write and do basic math. I came up North in the late 60s, got a job and went to work. At the age of 21 I had another child. I would read to my children and they looked up to me. This made me proud. However, I did not realize at that time that I needed to further my education in order to have a successful future.

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In corporate America there have been many positions that I have been qualified for, but because I lacked a college education I was not able to advance. I have seen many other women “passed over” for a job because they didn’t have the education, although they already had the experience. I have also witnessed men receiving higher pay for doing the same jobs as women do. In order for a woman to rise up the corporate ladder, she must have twice the education and experience as a man. And if she happens to achieve that, she will still have to struggle to gain respect. The United States has yet to come out of the dark ages, for there are some who still believe a woman’s place is in the home, barefoot, and pregnant.

I do not use “racism” as an excuse to conform to stereotypes in my life. But I have been discriminated against on many levels because I am a black woman. My experiences have taught me a lot. The most important lesson I’ve learned is that I need higher education in order to succeed in life. So, I’m back in school now, pursuing a degree in Business Management. I work at a company in Framingham, MA, where I have been for twenty-seven years, slowly making my way up from the assembly line to a position in the purchasing department. When I complete my degree, I hope to fulfill my dream of owning my own business.

I know I still have many obstacles to overcome, but with my life experiences, education, and God on my side, I will make it. Whenever I get tired of the struggle and the world tries to make me doubt myself by putting me down, I think back to Selma and to the message of Dr. Martin Luther King. I have a right to my dreams. And I intend to succeed.

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### **Take it further . . .**

For more perspective on Emma’s life, see the timeline on pp. 26-29.

1. Name some of the laws that passed during her life that might have affected her.
2. What else happened during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s that might have affected her life?